

# REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: NORMALCY BIAS

## SHORT DESCRIPTION

### **WHAT:**

The Normalcy Bias is the assumption that dramatic changes aren't going to occur and that life will continue in fundamentally the same way.

### **PROBLEM:**

The Normalcy Effect can lead to a complete underestimation of the dangers and threats that might exist in different areas of life. This can lead to poor planning and a disastrous lack of preparation.

### **SOLUTION:**

The lesson and meditation will increase awareness and the recognition of the dangers of the normalcy bias, improving the chances of realistic and effective recognition and planning.



The normalcy bias is the tendency to assume that they will not be any radical changes to the world or your routines. It is a default position for those who are skeptical that major changes are about to occur.

Part of the reason for this skepticism is that many people today make dire predictions that don't come true and a variety of deceptive communication techniques have made us ever more cynical.

However, dramatic changes do occur. The 2008 global financial crisis had a major effect on many people around the world.

The advent of online shopping caught many brick and mortar retailers off guard. Sometimes, major changes do occur. Whether you are cynic or someone who is open-minded, you can't simply assume that things are always going to be the same. Some predictions do come true.

## HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO TO PREVENT BEING CAUGHT OFF GUARD BY EVENTS YOU JUST DIDN'T BELIEVE WOULD HAPPEN

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1.

Listen to the argument. If, for example, a professional is predicting another global financial downturn, listen to the argument. You don't have to agree but at least listen for the reasons suggested.

2.

Is there any support from other professionals for the prediction? One person making a prediction is one thing, several pointing to the same conclusion makes a difference.

3.

Suspend your disbelief. The prediction may seem incredible but whatever you do don't just dismiss it on the ground that you think it's unlikely or your gut tells you it isn't so. We have a tendency to dislike change and therefore instinctively dismiss anything we don't want to face.

4.

**Writing exercise.** Even if you don't expect the prediction to come true, imagine what would happen if it were to come true. How would your life be affected? What would be different? How would the prediction impact loved ones and friends if it were to come true? In what ways would the world change? Write your responses down.

5.

**Writing exercise.** Is there anything you could do to mitigate the impact of the prediction? What would you have to do to prepare for the predicted event? Write down what preparations you could make.

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6.

Be mindful of whom you talk to this prediction about. Many people will be cynical and indulging in the normalcy bias and you don't want to be overly influenced by them. Ideally, you would talk to people on both sides of the fence, to get the range of views on the issue.

7.

Mindfulness exercises also will help in clearing your consciousness and helping put impulsive rationalizations in perspective.

Remember, it's better to be prepared than sorry. The default setting is disbelief and denial, but many people from time immemorial have been caught out simply because they didn't want to believe an emerging trend or a prediction.

Remember it wasn't that long ago when it was thought that ebooks would never really catch on or that a certain person would ever be elected president. Change happens all the time and you ignore the possibilities at your peril.

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*If you have always done it that way, it is probably wrong.*

– Charles Kettering

The Normalcy Bias is the tendency to gravitate to the normal when considering current and especially future conditions that offer completely new challenges. What this can mean is a disastrous failure to successfully adapt to events that have never happened before and are thus not part of one's experience.

The normalcy bias has come into play significantly in the last 20 years because of the pace of technological innovation. For example, many brick and mortar companies did not see the impact of technology, and especially online shopping, and as a result failed to adapt accordingly.

Interestingly, it wasn't that these companies couldn't see the trends that were developing, it's more like they couldn't effectively relate to them because they hadn't happened before. It was as if these were just ideas, rather than impending realities. They had no experience of the predicted changes and were looking at them from a more conservative mindset.

Because new ideas by definition, haven't been manifested and those manifestations weren't experienced, some companies were stuck with the normalcy mindset.

Whether it was a difficulty understanding what the predictions actually meant, or a stubborn commitment to the normal, or both, probably varies from situation to situation. Remember, people are more likely than not to refute that Armageddon is actually coming.

# Reducing Workplace Bias: Normalcy Bias

In a rapidly changing world, a normalcy bias can obviously be a hindrance to an organization's development as well as its survival. For example, how have organizations individually adapted to the total disruption to marketing with the advent of social media?

I am sure there are companies who early on in the social media revolution invested time, effort and money in training their marketers to learn about social media and adapt newer marketing strategies, while others plodded on with their normal practices. The latter were in serious danger of being left behind and having to play catch-up with the competition, not to mention incurring losses on “normal” marketing that stopped paying the dividends it used to.

Success very often comes from being an early adapter to a new trend and impending innovation. This has become increasingly obvious in the past twenty years and in some ways such disruption is the “new normal”. However, there will always be challenges that are underestimated by some.



*There is only one thing stronger than all the armies of the world: and that is an idea whose time has come.*

– Victor Hugo

For example, how will climate change, however instigated, affect every aspect of life? There is definitely a chance it will be like nothing ever experienced before. That makes it both daunting but also more prone to dismissal through the Normalcy Bias.

Part of that bias is that we simply don't want to admit that major transitions are occurring. They make us feel more uncertain than ever and if cognitive bias has one function, it is to help us retain our sense of control.

The problem as always is how do you really get your head around predicted possible changes and how do you scale not just their probability but their impact?

One way, of course, is to be open to the possibility of anything, even if it is frightening and threatens to turn your world upside down. Remember that what you consider “normal” today was once considered an outrageous fantasy.



*Learning and innovation go hand in hand. The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow.*

– William Pollard

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## MEDITATION

As you relax and concede your need to control the environment around you and your previous stories and narratives, allow memories to spontaneously pass through your consciousness.

As you see memories of past decisions, you can see your choices in action. You can see some of the decisions you have made that have had major implications in your life.

The salient experiences and choices will come to mind.

Are there times when you have adopted a normalcy bias and been too conservative in your thinking?

Have you clung on to old ways of doing things because they are comfortable and don't require change?

"If you have always done it that way, it is probably wrong."

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Sometimes you need to move out of your comfort zone and embrace new scenarios.

Sometimes your comfort zone can become a discomfort zone, if not a disaster area..

The ability to embrace change is an essential leadership skill.

The ability to see what is normal and look beyond it is an essential management skill.

Look outside the box, the box of normalcy.

Normalcy is a comfortable box but it is also confining. It can seem like a nice hotel suite but it can also be a jail cell.

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Normalcy is comfortable. And comfort can be dangerous.